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OFFICE OF  
NATIONAL ESTIMATES

## MEMORANDUM

*Korea: How Real Is the Thaw?*

**Secret**

13 October 1971

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# CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

## OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

13 October 1971

### MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Korea: How Real is the Thaw?

### NOTE

For the first time in a generation, Seoul and Pyongyang are talking to one another. In August, the South Korean Red Cross proposed and its North Korean counterpart accepted the idea of bilateral talks at Panmunjom on matters relating to divided families. The contacts have so far been cautious and limited. Any discussion of political issues -- much less "unification" -- seems years away. But the very fact of movement in this relationship raises interesting questions regarding its motivation and ultimate direction.

The current Red Cross talks, of course, are only one facet of the increasingly complex interrelationship between North and

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South Korea and their respective allies. In an Estimate (NIE 42/14.2-72, "The Two Koreas") to be published early in 1972, we intend to examine the issue in much greater depth.

1. From the Korean point of view, their country's history over the past hundred years is one of a small nation's interests repeatedly subordinated to the requirements of great-power politics. Thus, the extraordinary sensitivity of Koreans -- North and South -- to recent developments in US-Chinese relations; and their rapid movement toward bilateral talks -- the first since the outbreak of the Korean War.

Background

2. Not that the two Koreas have only just awakened to the need to modify, at least overtly, their hostility toward one another. At least since the Nixon Doctrine was enunciated in mid-1969, South Korea has been painfully aware of the US intention to reduce military commitments in East Asia. The subsequent troop withdrawals from South Vietnam and the closing of the deal for returning Okinawa to Japan underlined the intent of US policymakers. Lingering doubts in Seoul were resolved by the unexpectedly

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rapid US removal of one of two combat divisions from the ROK -- and the US no longer maintains a forward deployment along the Korean Demilitarized Zone. As anticipated, South Korean responses to these moves focused on securing additional US arms aid and treaty commitments. But the ROK government, in a radical departure from past policies, also embarked on a program of mending fences with "non-hostile" communist countries -- i.e., those in Europe.

3. Seoul's more flexible approach to the communist world was also a product of political pressures at home where criticism of President Pak had begun to center on his excessive rigidity in the conduct of foreign affairs -- particularly his failure to show any progress on reuniting families separated since Korea's division in 1945. This criticism surfaced in significant measure during the Spring 1971 presidential election campaign when Pak's opponent gained supporters by advocating more flexible foreign policies, including efforts to secure some form of great-power guarantee for the divided nation.

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4. The North Koreans, too, have shown greater flexibility in managing their external affairs in recent years. In early 1969, Kim Il-song scrapped the tactics of large-scale violence and sabotage which had been pursued against the South Koreans over the previous three years. These tactics had failed to achieve anything for the North, incurring much international opprobrium in the process. (They had also led to a strengthening of Pak's military and political position in the South.) Pyongyang returned to the more modest (and internationally acceptable) propaganda and infiltration tactics characteristic of the pre-1966 period.

5. Even several years earlier, from about 1965, Kim had been seeking as part of his chuch'e (self-reliance) doctrine to increase contacts with Western Europe and the Third World. Kim's propagandists claim that the chuch'e doctrine contains important new contributions to the corpus of Marxism-Leninism. As a practical matter, however, the doctrine is designed to serve the inter-related purposes of inflating Kim's historical role and of asserting North Korea's right to pursue its own course between China and the USSR, neither of which could be relied upon not to interfere in Korean communist politics or to give priority to North Korean interests. Thus, both Koreas have for several years been

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seeking to accommodate to a changing world in which major allies no longer seemed so concerned with Korean affairs and other nations appeared weary of such cold war legacies as the Korean confrontation.

The Chinese-American Summit

6. The US-Chinese announcement this past July added an element of urgency to these preoccupations in North and South Korea. Neither side, in its effort to attract international support, has wanted to appear out of step with the new mood in East Asia. However, both have been genuinely concerned that another in the long line of great-power sellouts of Korean interests might be in the offing.

7. For Pyongyang, initially at least, a major concern was that a conciliatory Peking might dilute further its already meager political and propaganda support for North Korean objectives in South Korea. Assuming Moscow's continued lack of interest in the subject, this would effectively weaken the credibility of any future posturing vis-a-vis the South by Kim Il-song.\* The

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\* Not to mention killing what remains of his dream of a unified Korea under his control; and, in turn, removing the doctrinal underpinnings of Kim's garrison state.

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North Koreans probably also have foreseen the possibility of greatly reduced Chinese military and economic aid in the event of any far-reaching US-Chinese rapprochement. And in such circumstances, of course, they would fear that the competing Soviets might reduce their aid.

8. Pyongyang responded quickly. On the heels of the US-Chinese announcement, North Korea and China exchanged high-level delegations. Out of these visits probably came assurances to Kim that Pyongyang's interests would not be sacrificed in the Nixon-Chou discussions. In any case, Kim supplied his public endorsement of the new Chinese posture. Kim also obtained -- a few weeks later -- new and well-publicized economic and military assistance grants from Peking.

9. Peking may have also succeeded in convincing the bellicose North Korean leader that the desired withdrawal of US forces from South Korea could best be achieved in an atmosphere of detente.\*

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\* China is obviously working to ensure that nothing will occur in North Korea to upset any negotiation with Washington. Peking may have a broader objective and be seeking to open a dialogue with the US on the Korean issue. In July, China returned its representative to the Military Armistice Commission at Panmunjom after an absence of six years. In early August, Chou En-lai reminded James Reston that the Korean War had ended in a truce rather than a peace treaty, and noted that some kind of rapprochement between the two Koreas should be sought. Chou has also observed to other visitors that Panmunjom is the only place where US, Chinese, and North and South Korean representatives meet regularly.

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In any case, on 6 August Kim indicated a willingness to meet with "all political parties," including representatives of Pak's Democratic Republican Party (DRP), and "social organizations and individual personages in South Korea" in a renewed effort to achieve unification of the peninsula. Although Kim chose a highly propagandistic forum -- a mass rally honoring visiting Prince Sihanouk -- for his remarks, and repeated other well-worn conditions which Seoul had previously rejected, this was the first time that he had accepted the South Korean ruling party as a legitimate negotiating partner.\*

10. In Seoul, since the Chou-Nixon announcement, speculation has been centered on the relationship between the projected presidential visit and US plans to reduce its military presence

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\* Kim cited this as a major "concession" on his part in a subsequent interview in the Japanese newspaper Asahi Shimbun. He went on to soften previous Chinese-North Korean charges that Japan was being groomed to take over the US military role in the Far East. He further suggested that if the ROK were to abrogate its security treaty with the US and its "military alliance" with Japan, North Korea would abrogate its treaties with USSR and China -- if these proved to be an "obstacle" to unification. Kim's 6 August "concession," however, was totally unacceptable to the ROK. It represented little advance over the period 1946-47 when the US-Soviet Joint Commission haggled for months over which political and social groups were eligible to consult on the nature and form of a unified Korea.

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in East Asia. The South Koreans fear complete withdrawal of US ground forces from their territory -- forces which in their view are the prime deterrent to the North Koreans -- and are concerned over further US pullbacks in Japan and Okinawa as well. They are apprehensive that an agreement with Peking might lead Washington (as in 1948-49) to lose direct interest in the military security of the ROK. Despite occasional South Korean talk of "options" -- e.g., alliance with Japan, four-power guarantees, "neutralization" -- the US remains in South Korean eyes the only viable guarantor of the nation's security.

11. Despite President Pak's success only several months before in nailing down a US commitment to a substantial five-year program of modernization of the ROK armed forces, Seoul has since the US-Chinese announcement sought renewed US assurances that its interests would not be overlooked at the Peking meetings. South Korean leaders are also offering the olive branch to Moscow and Peking.

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12. Seoul has also moved rapidly to match the tone of Kim Il-song's early August pronouncements. On 12 August, the South Koreans proposed that the Red Cross societies of the two countries begin talks on locating divided families. This proposal was an old "humanitarian" formula advanced many times in the past, but this time it was shorn of the objectionable political conditions which had always been attached to it. On 14 August, Pyongyang accepted the proposal and went further, suggesting that the talks be expanded to include correspondence and visits between divided families. On the same day -- possibly by coincidence -- South Korean Prime Minister Kim Chong-pil noted that Seoul would not necessarily oppose simultaneous admission of both Koreas to the UN. On 16 August, a ROK cabinet minister publicly acknowledged the possibility of official bilateral contacts with the North Korean government. This was a major shift from the position set forth in President Pak's 1970 Liberation Day address in which he maintained his longstanding position that official contacts would be possible only in a UN forum.

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Prospects

13. The Red Cross talks have commenced. Several preliminary discussions have taken place to date at which a number of details have been worked out. Delegate lists have been exchanged; agreement has been reached that each side establish a permanent liaison office at Panmunjon; and telephone lines are being installed between them. A few days ago, it was agreed to hold any substantive meetings alternately in Seoul and Pyongyang -- thought to be an important breakthrough in Seoul's view. Throughout the talks, everyone has been very polite.

14. Aside from such mechanics, however, little is being accomplished. As the meetings have become more routine, both sides have been guilty of injecting mild polemics. The North Koreans keep trying to upstage Seoul by claiming the initiative for the talks; and they hold out the possibility -- for propaganda purposes -- that Red Cross contacts could soon evolve into full-fledged negotiations on unification. The South Koreans have used the fact of the talks to gain postponement of the annual UN debate

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on Korea;\* meanwhile, they are working to prevent the meetings from moving into the political realm.

15. Nonetheless, the Red Cross discussions are serving some useful purpose at this time. For international audiences, they mute the continuing hostility between Seoul and Pyongyang. They open a channel -- unobstructed by foreigners -- which may be useful to the Korean parties in some unforeseen contingency. And both probably hope that by talking they may gain the approval of their patrons and perhaps establish a bit of leverage on their decisions.

16. But is all this really going to lead to significant change in the frigid relationship between North and South? Perhaps not. Some ROK officials appear to anticipate genuine progress in the Red Cross talks in the months ahead, but negotiations are

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\* The possibility that Peking will soon enter the United Nations has highlighted speculation that the UN might also move in a year or so to divest itself of its role as a partisan in the Korean War -- e.g., dropping the annual UN debates entirely and, more importantly, dismantling the UNCURK mechanism. Such action by the UN would also call into question the status of the United Nations Command in Korea and its supporting establishment based in Japan.

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controlled by the ROK CIA which is preoccupied, of course, with security considerations. Its officials foresee major problems in any extensive contact between their people and the tightly regimented and highly politicized Northerners. Thus ROK plans are to stall serious negotiations until next spring (presumably until after President Nixon's visit to Peking) and to spin them out for some time thereafter.

17. Pyongyang has had long experience with such ROK attitudes and probably anticipates few accomplishments in the near term. North Korean propaganda has already begun to lay the groundwork for possible failure of the Red Cross talks. In any case, it is certain that progress, if any, in the bilateral talks will be glacial. It is equally certain, however, that neither side will want to bear the onus for any breakdown in the talks, which could mean so much to several million Koreans on both sides of the line.

18. It is possible, of course, that despite impediments, public opinion (perhaps coupled with foreign pressures) might somehow lead the parties to an agreement on the issue of families. If progress is made in this sphere more difficult issues may then be tackled by the Koreans -- e.g., mail exchanges, sports and cultural

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visits, trips by journalists, and perhaps even limited trading arrangements. Measureable progress on one or two of these issues, in turn, could help reduce mutually hostile Korean attitudes and tone down the propaganda content of the negotiating environment generally.

19. Substantive political talks between the two Koreas, however, are not likely to be on the agenda for years to come. The bitterness of 1950-53 still pervades the generation in power in both North and South. And while North Korea has begun to downplay its concern with reviving Japanese military prowess, it continues to make complete withdrawal of US troops from South Korea a prime condition for any decisive improvement in relations with the ROK. Moreover, Pyongyang has yet to renounce the use of force to unify the peninsula, certainly a precondition to any political talks or moves toward "unification." In our view there will have to be some fairly profound changes in Pyongyang's brand of communism before any meaningful political dialogue can take place between the two Koreas. And in both Koreas, the leadership, the military, and the bureaucracies have vested interests in continued separation; indeed, the fundamental policies of both are predicated upon the existence of "threats" from the other.

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20. But having concluded that current North-South contacts are unlikely to change the basic nature of the Korean problem for many years to come, it is as important to note some positive aspects. The logjam has after all been broken; the parties are talking; and they are likely to continue to do so for some time. There are some relatively uncomplicated non-political issues susceptible of agreement. Any long, drawn out discussions are likely to generate public expectations, even pressures, for real agreement. Such negotiations might well come about, for example, if something approaching normalized relations between the US and China were to be realized. In sum, unless the current Red Cross talks in Korea are broken off completely in short order, they may well become the seedbed for the more far-reaching negotiations that have seemed all but impossible to contemplate.

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